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Death as Archaeology of Transition: Thoughts and Materials

Papers from the II International Conference of
Transition Archaeology: Death Archaeology
29th April – 1st May 2013

Edited by

Leonor Rocha
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A LAPA DO SONO (SESIMBRA, PORTUGAL) – NEWS ABOUT A NEOLITHIC FUNERARY CONTEXT

Rosário Fernandes,¹ Pablo Arias,² Mariana Diniz,³ Frederico Tátá,⁴
Paulo Rodrigues,⁵ Leonor Rocha⁶

ABSTRACT

The Lapa do Sono cave (Sesimbra, Portugal), was identified in 2005 during a speleological survey. It was apparently intact at the time of its discovery. During that work, the site could be classified as a Prehistoric burial cave, as some human bones (including a complete skull) and pottery sherds were found. A detailed analysis of the latter and the ¹⁴C of the skull confirm its classification in the regional late Early Neolithic.

This paper presents a preliminary description and characterization of this context, which will constitute the basis for further archaeological field work.

Keywords: Burial caves; Sesimbra; Lapa do Sono; Neolithic

RESUMO

A Lapa do Sono (Sesimbra, Portugal) foi identificada em 2005, no decurso de trabalhos de levantamento espeleológico, encontrando-se aparentemente intacta à data da sua descoberta.

No âmbito do levantamento e das observações superficiais entretanto realizadas para definir as características e a formação do depósito arqueológico existente, foi possível perceber que se trata de uma gruta com uma ocupação funerária, tendo já anteriormente sido recolhido um crânio no seu interior, e alguns fragmentos de cerâmica.

A análise detalhada deste espólio bem como a datação ¹⁴C entretanto realizada apontam para uma ocupação enquadrada dentro do Neolítico antigo evoluído da região.

São estes dados preliminares, descrição e caracterização sumária deste arqueossítio, que aqui se apresentam e que constituem a base para a intervenção arqueológica que, no presente ano, se inicia.

Palavras-chave: Grutas sepulcrais naturais; Sesimbra; Lapa do Sono; Neolítico

1. INTRODUCTION

The project “Occupations of Prehistory [recent] Arrábida - OPA” has as main objective the study of human occupation in this region during the recent pre-history, in particular the study of Ancient / Middle Neolithic. This work focuses on the data, still preliminary, obtained in this project, which began in 2012, and is grounded in other previous studies. Lapa do Sono is located near the small town of Pinheirinhos, Zambujal (being about from the road Pinheirinhos/Casais da Serra 1.5km), geographical location is M: 110659; P: 163783, at an altitude of 200m. Not being detected in the current landscape. The access to the interior of the cave is done through a small, opening artificially made by speleologists, an horizontal progression with polygonal features, tracing of compliance approximately 19m and a vertical drop, which from the entrance measured 6m. At the presente moment,

the cave is divided into two distinct areas, designated by us of Sector A and Sector B.

Near the entrance (Sector A), the cave appears to be full of archaeological sediments. The space comprised between the top layer and the ceiling of the cave is less than 1m, in this area, and measures from its length and lower width, respectively 4m and 6m. The land's original surface, has a reddish tone, *terra rossa*, which consists in fine grain scarcely compacted, recording human bones and pottery.

Section (B) corresponds to the area presently deeper of the cave and also larger, which access is done through a very narrow passage between archaeological sediments and rock. It has a maximum height of 2m and an area of approximately 100m² and is characterized by the presence in many speleothems (stalactites, stalagmites, columns). The archaeological remains are scarce in this space, and those that occur appear to result from Sector A. It is also observed nearby of the walls, a calcite deposit, although it seems unlikely, can eventually hide archaeological remains.

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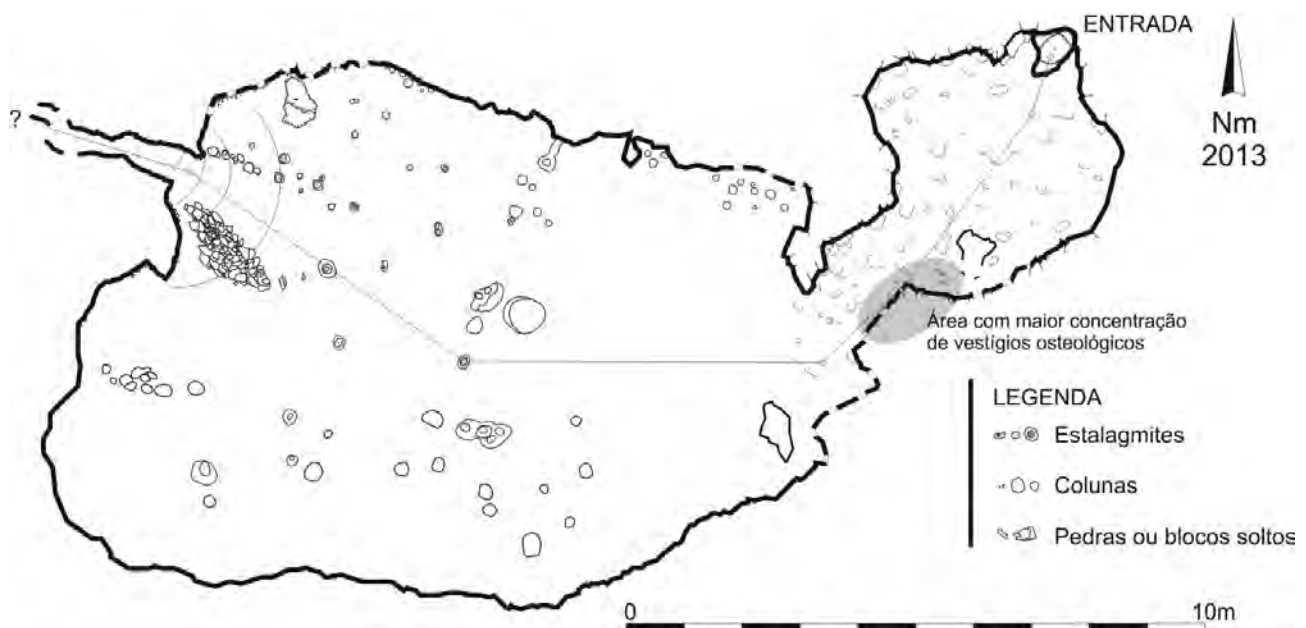


FIGURE 1. CAVE PLANT (NOW KNOWN)



FIGURE 2. THE ARCHEOLOGICAL SEDIMENTS SECTOR A

2. GEOLOGICAL SETTING

Cape Espichel is cut by an erosion surface, tilted to West, with an altitude ranging from 240m (close to Sesimbra town) to 140m at its western terminus. The area can be considered a littoral karst (Rodrigues *et al.* 2007), affected by the sea's influence. This influence is both direct (erosion agent) and indirect (water drainage base level).

Structurally (Manupella *et al.* 1999) Cape Espichel West terminus is a monocline. The monocline is the long flank (North flank in this case) of an anticline fold, with an axial plan of WNW-ESE strike, and an axis positioned South of present day shoreline. Towards East (Manupella *et al.*, 1999), the geological layers are deformed by other structures, such as: Forte da Baralha's horst, Cova da Mijona's dome, and at last Sesimbra's diapir.

Lapa do Sono locates, according to Chart 38B – Setúbal, of Portugal geological map at 1/50000 scale, at Cova da Mijona dome Eastern flank. The cave develops, according to the above mentioned chart, in Calcários de Pedreiras formation. This formation is composed of micritic limestone and has been dated as being from Calovian to upper Batonian (Dogger). The known thickness ranges from 230m to 180m. This last value has been measured at the place of Facho da Azoia, not far from the cave (Manupella *et al.*, 1999).

The cave appears to be a part of an ancient collector, nowadays at a fossil stage, and probably broken up into several sections. There is abundant litochemical and detrital sediment in the cave. The detrital sediment, a fine to very fine sand, is found mostly near the cave entrance. Close by the cave terminus, there is what appears to be a former water inlet, lined up with the cave orientation. This might indicate a possible cave continuation to South.

3. THE SITE

Lapa do Sono was identified during work of speleological exploration, in November 2004, by Rui Francisco and José Brazinha. The cave was found intact and the caving was immediately suspended. The first reference to the site, carried out in in 2005 publication by NECA (NECA, 2005), and later revisited in the context of archaeological work on the Archaeological Map of Sesimbra (AAVV, 2009).

3.1. THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT

At this time the sediment seals the primary/original cavity inlet perhaps due to geological or anthropic processes, still haven't yet been defined. The south side of the cave is composed of bedrock (limestone J2pe-lime quarries), while the north wall is of sediment and stone blocks of small and medium size. This deposition may result from

natural processes closing the entrance. But we cannot also rule out the possibility that this could have been the result of deliberate human activity, possibly carried out during the close of the funerary space. Though, such confirmation requires more detailed study deposit formation to confirm, or deny, the artificial seal of the cave. It may be also possible by characteristics of the deposit and its dispersion that originally existed another practicable input.

As said earlier, the cave has two spaces, essentially differentiated by the presence or absence of archaeological remains. Sector A, near the entrance, presented very clogged by sediments that pack the highest concentration, visible, of pottery fragments and human bones in the cavity (Fernandes, 2011).

Stands out the large concentration of visible archaeological remains, currently present just in Sector A, which has a stratigraphic power, estimated in order of 5m.

Although at the present moment the access to the cave is conditioned by the archeological sediment, in the past, it

may had been simpler to enter, walk, as well as carrying the deceased.

By comparison to others known natural caves burials at Arrábida, such Lapa do Fumo and Lapa do Bugio, beyond their later occupations, Lapa do Sono may had another primary entrance, once, in those cited wasn't archeological sediment near their entrance like the one visible nowadays on Lapa do Sono.

Only in the course of future excavations will be possible to understand the nature and formation of these deposits and the eventual management of the internal spaces of the cave, which appear to have occurred.

With respect to the archaeological material collected, still under study, there are pottery fragments with and without decoration, in general folders with purified, compact and application / thick watery finish of the external and internal surfaces of the containers. The decoration, the techniques employed, incised and plastic cords or decorative pattern in the spine and bands, fits into the cultural universe of

TABLE 1 - LAPA SONO - ABSOLUTE DATING

Natural cave	Reference	Sample/ Context	Date BP	1 σ cal BC	2 σ cal BC
OxA-259979	Homo sapiens	Deposição Superficial	5407 \pm 31	4328-4252	4340-4176

TABLE 2 - DATED C14 AVAILABLE FOR V-IV MILLENNIUM IN PORTUGAL. (ADAPTED FROM BOAVENTURA, 2009)

Natural Cave	Reference	Sample/ Context	Date BP	1 σ cal BC	2 σ cal BC
Gruta do Caldeirão	TO-350	Homo	5810 \pm 70	4730-4550	4840-4490
Castelo Belinho	Beta- 199913	Homo	5720 \pm 40	4620-4490	4690-4460
Castelo Belinho	Beta- 199912	Homo	5500 \pm 40	4380-4320	4450-4310
Lapa dos Namorados	ICEN-735	Homo	5460 \pm 110	4460-4220	4520-4040
Cadaval	ICEN-803	Homo	5390 \pm 50	4340-4220	4350-4150
Cadaval	ICEN-464	Homo	5160 \pm 50	4050-3940	4060-3790
Costa do Pereiro	WK 13682	Homo	5133 \pm 45	3990-3930	4000-3790
N. Sra. Lapas	I-17247	Homo	5130 \pm 140	4060-3760	4260-3650
Lugar do Canto	Sac-1715	Homo	5120 \pm 80	3990-3790	4070-3700

the Early Neolithic pottery production (Carvalho, 2005; Diniz, 1994, 2007; Simões, 1999).

Resulting from speleological activities was also identified a human skull (Sector A). That was in a vulnerable area, and in order to prevent its destruction was collected and proceeded a summary study (Marques and Silva, 2009).

Sexual diagnose procedure classified as an adult female, with around 45-50 years of age at death, presenting the face severely deteriorated by the action of taphonomic processes. The second premolar (right) presents a fairly high degree of wear. Were still observed loss antemortem (right 1st premolar) and already postmortem, lacking the central incisor and upper right side (Marques and Silva, 2009: 151).

Use the cavity as burial space appears to have been very limited, restricted to the area immediately adjacent to the current entry. There should, however, be ruled out that this use as necropolis extend to a larger area.

It is, however, at this time, very clear preference, and the intense occupation of Sector A, which judging by the available data - typology of ceramics and absolute dating - have acted as a necropolis, at a terminal time of the Early Neolithic. Note, though, that this is a preliminary reading, based on information that come exclusively from works of speleological exploration, and that the archaeological intervention may change.

The chrono cultural integration based on ceramic materials, has recently been corroborated by the first absolute dating available for Lapa do Sono obtained from a molar collected from the skull to the Sector A, and situating this burial context in the last third of the V millennium cal BC.

4. SOME COMMENTS ON THE SITE

The identification of a necropolis assemblage in the Lapa do Sono natural cave and the absolute dating available for the only human deposition identified so far may expand, both, the knowledge about the Neolithic burial practices in the Setúbal Peninsula and the funerary structures in the architecture framework of the 2nd half of the 5th millennium BC, a stage that remains particularly poorly known, in the current Portuguese territory.

Lapa do Sono is located within a limestone landscape where the use of natural caves as necropolises during the Neolithic is well documented (for a synthesis Fernandes, 2011). Arrábida is one of the areas where the continuity of symbolic practices of the earliest Neolithic communities is confirmed, which are attested in the current Portuguese territory since the mid / last quarter of the 6th millennium BC (Diniz, 2009), with the systematic use of karst cavities as sites for burials - apparently primary burials - and where decorated pottery is part of votive artefacts.

In this context the burial identified in Lapa do Sono, dating from the last third of the 5th millennium BC,

seems particularly significant, either interpreted within the regional human settlement network - in the Neolithic boundaries of Lisbon and Setúbal peninsulas - or comprised in the wider sphere of ritual behaviours of the 2nd half of the 5th millennium in western Iberia:

1. Regarding the regional human settlement, it seems recognizable in Lapa do Sono a situation that has been observed in other contexts of Lower Extremadura (Cardoso, 2010), the enduring - until the end of the 5th millennium BC - of the technical and decorative motifs that characterize the ceramic productions of the Early Neolithic. If the chronology and the formulas for the transition to the Middle Neolithic are very poorly defined, and the contexts listed below are still insufficiently characterized, the presence of impressed and incised pottery at the Palácio dos Lumiares, Lisbon (Valera, 2006), and Encosta de Santa Ana, Lisbon (Muralha and Costa, 2006), associated with dates referring to the late 5th millennium, reveals the persistence of these decorative patterns - in necropolis but also habitat environments - transition to the 5th / 4th millennium BC. The true meaning of these continuities is not yet defined and only with new dates on well preserved contexts may the nature of these apparent anachronisms be clarified;

2. Concerning the ritual behaviours and noting the scarce information available for the second half of the 5th millennium, the burial of Lapa do Sono allows to record the diversity of funeral solutions, architectures (natural or anthropogenic), rituals and artefacts - that will intensify during the 4th millennium BC - and that seems to establish a characteristic trend of agro-pastoral societies. Having basis in the available archaeological record two sites with absolute dating are discussed - Lapa do Sono and Castelo Belinho, Silves - whose funerary spaces and assemblages are not similar. It is attested in Lapa do Sono the use of a natural cavity in a karst landscape as funerary space in association with the deposition of ceramic vessels, distant from the habitat area, which is a recurring behaviour in limestone environments since the Early Neolithic and that will last until the collapse of agro-metallurgical societies. In Castelo Belinho, instead, ditches were excavated in the habitat space intended for primary and secondary depositions of human remains together with diverse artefacts, among which the *Glycymeris* bracelets must be mentioned (Gomes, 2008 and 2010), setting up a funerary ritual (architecture + artefacts) that is not documented from other periods. According to the very scarce existing information this final stage of the Early Neolithic transition to the Middle Neolithic documented in Lapa do Sono likely endorses a significant diversity of behaviour in the symbolic field, particularly in relation to death, that originated specific archaeological record. If these are regionally assumed solutions, if the apparent contemporaneity of these sites is only resulting from the imprecision of the radiocarbon dating scale, those are open questions that will only be clarified with further developing of the research.

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